Baltimore Playwright Dramatizes South Africa's Apartheid

By Alicia Benjamin
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For 491 days Mujaji Omu was tortured by white South African police officers.

She was continuously interrogated and harassed while in the prison cell.

Finally, she gave them the information they wanted after she started urinating blood.

Mujaji is a character in Barbara Molette's play about apartheid in South Africa and its effects on the blacks, coloreds and whites in the country.

Her play, "Perfect Fifth," will be presented at The Arena Playhouse, 801 McCulloh Street this week and will continue through to August 14.

Molette has been interested in South Africa since she was a child in the 1940's. She read books and newspaper articles about the torn country when she was as young as six years old.

While in elementary school, she wrote and acted in her own plays.

She remembers putting on plays in her backyard and charging people money to attend.

Her fifth grade Christmas play was written by her, but to her disappointment, she did not get the lead in the production.

Could this have led the young playwright to focus on playwrighting instead of acting, early?

It was not until her graduate school years in Florida, at Florida State University, that she wrote another play.

And it was only by accident that she enrolled in a playwrighting course.

She was supposed to take a film class but the instructor suffered a stroke, so she and the other students had to choose an elective. Playwrighting was the only other course available.

Molette has written six plays and all but two of them were co-authored by her husband, Carlton Molette.

"Rosalee Prichett," written by the Molette's, featured Esther Rolle, and was produced by the Negro Ensemble Company in New York.

Another collaborative effort by the Molette's, "Black Theatre: Premise and Presentation," is used as a theatre textbook by several colleges and universities including Temple University and the University of California at Berkeley.

She and her husband have lived in several U.S. cities. They have moved from job to job at different colleges and universities across the country, staying in each town for years at a time.

Molette taught costume design, theatre history, humanities and playwrighting at schools in Washington, D.C., Alabama, Houston, Missouri, Iowa and Florida.

While in Jefferson City, MO, Molette wrote "Perfect Fifth," for a former student as a vehicle for her to play Winnie Mandela, the wife of jailed South African leader, Nelson Mandela.

Molette also wrote "Perfect Fifth," as her doctoral dissertation. The play was originally written as a television script.

"I first wrote the play with the idea of Mujaji being Winnie Mandela," Molette said.

"But in the television, I didn't want the audience to identify the character with Winnie Mandela or trying to pick out what was truth and what was fabrication," she continued.

"Still, there are Mandela overtones," she added. She said Mujaji's defiance and her imprisonment parallel Winnie Mandela's life."

For background, Molette read about 12 books on South African blacks, coloreds and whites and the Broederbond, an organization of white men who are devoted to white supremacy.

"I was surprised the number of books that are available about the Broederbond and middle class blacks in South Africa," she stated.

The play also focuses on the impact the system of apartheid has on a "colored" family in South Africa," who strive to be middle class. Their dream is to have a swimming pool built in their backyard, a symbol of white middle class life in the country.

A "colored" couple from South Africa who were visiting Missouri in 1986 also gave Molette the idea for the play.

"The one thing they wanted was to build a swimming pool," she said.

She told them she has at one time owned a swimming pool but would never build one again because it was too expensive.

"But I couldn't sway them," she said. "They wanted it, (the swimming pool) for status reasons."

"They wanted to buy their way into social respectability. They didn't understand that spending money was no way to achieve success."

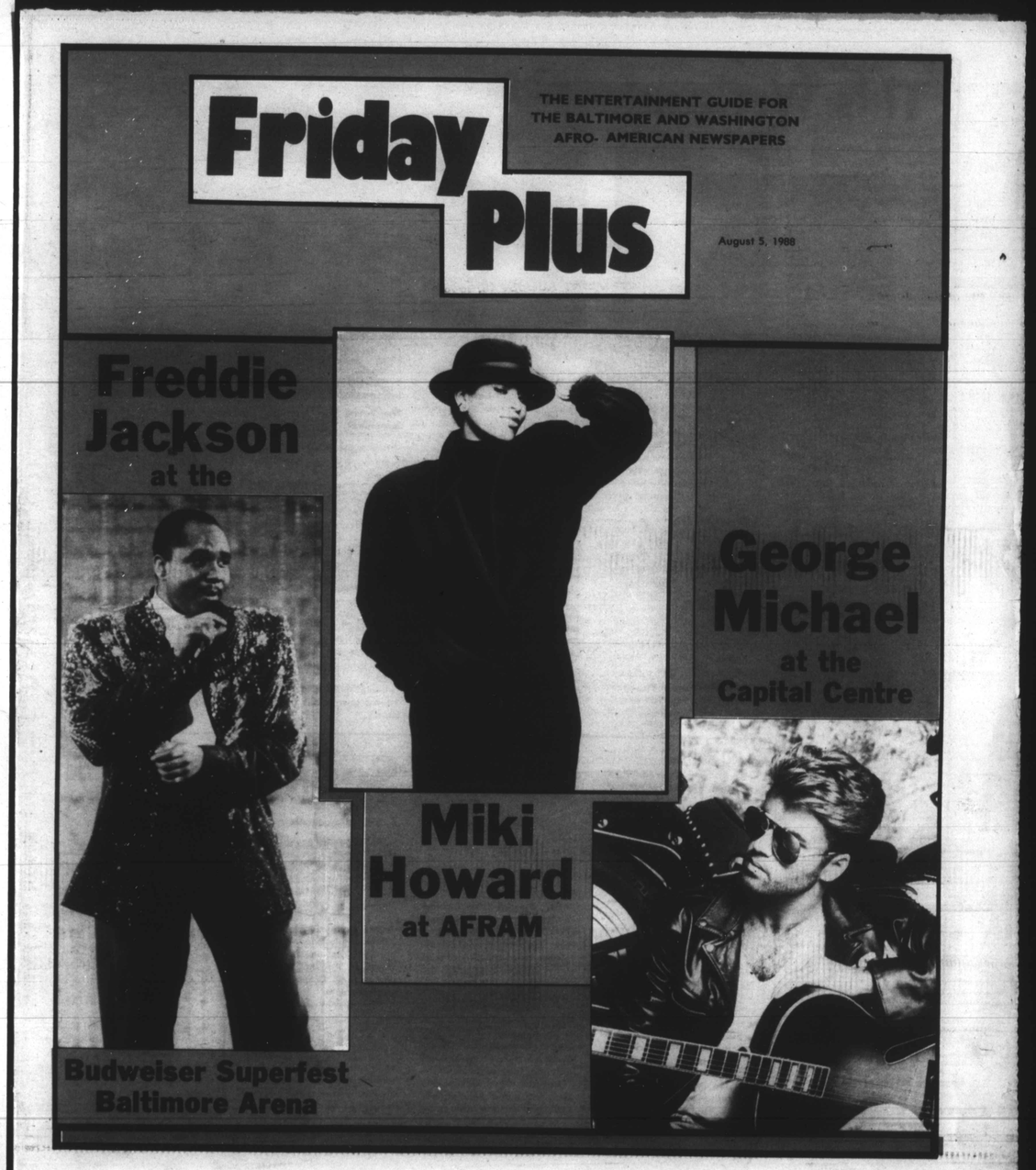
The couple's indifference to the plight of the Black Africans in their own country and the African's struggle to end the racism and unfair treatment, are both topics in Molette' splay.

When Molette came to Baltimore to teach Humanities at Morgan State University, she entered the play in WMAR's 1988 Black Drama Contest and won third prize.

The play will be presented by the Arena Players Thursday through Sunday, August 4-7 and 11-14. Curtain is at 8:30 on Thursday and Friday and 7:30 on Saturday and Sunday. On August 14, there will be a 2:30 p.m. matinee.

Molette grew up in Los Angeles with noted actor Paul Winfield who has appeared in "Sounder," and a number of other film and theater productions.

She said she would ike to be as famous and successful as Winfield.

Who knows? Maybe one day, she will be.

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